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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influences of mothers' involvement in their children's social lives. Subjects were 143 children in grades 3 through 6 in two schools in the Kitchener-Waterloo region of Ontario and their mothers. Information on children's social behavior was obtained from peer ratings on the Revised Class Play test. Mothers completed questionnaires assessing their own peer group experiences in childhood and currently; their affective reactions to peer experiences; the value they placed on sociability and obedience; and their beliefs about their children's social behavior. Mothers also completed a checklist assessing their involvement in their children's lives. Four principal types of activities characterized mothers' involvement. These were Monitoring, Orchestration, Advice and Support, and High-Concern activities. Mothers tended to perceive their children as having the same level of sociability as they viewed themselves as having. Mothers who valued sociability tended to perceive their children's social behavior similarly to the way peers did. Results of the maternal involvement assessment included: (1) mothers who were socially withdrawn in childhood or sociable as adults had higher orchestration scores; (2) maternal involvement was greater when mothers perceived their children to be withdrawn; and (3) the more concerned mothers were, the greater were their advice and support and high-concern scores. A reference list of 15 items is included. (BC)

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MATERNAL INVOLVEMENT IN CHILDREN'S PEER RELATIONSHIPS: THE CONTRIBUTION OF MOTHERS' EXPERIENCES, VALUES AND BELIEFS

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ABSTRACT

Influences on parents' involvement in their children's social lives were studied. 143 mothers of children in grades 3-6 completed questionnaires assessing their own peer group experiences, values, beliefs about their children's sociability, and parental involvement. Involvement subscales included Monitoring, Orchestration, Advice and Support, and High-Concern activities. Mothers' own peer experiences and values influenced their involvement both directly, and indirectly by influencing the accuracy of their perceptions of their children's social behaviour. In turn, greater involvement occurred when mothers perceived their children to be unsociable and were concerned. Maternal beliefs were also associated with involvement, although the nature of this relation depended on the value mothers placed on sociability.

INTRODUCTION

Children's peer relationships appear to be a domain of socialization that parents monitor and reflect upon (Mills & Rubin, 1990). Several researchers have suggested that managing young children's relationships with peers is a highly salient and often stressful issue for parents (Bartz, 1978; Newson & Newson, 1976). Recently, parents' efforts to manage their children's social lives, by supervising and arranging their contacts with peers and by providing emotional support, have been found to be related to children's social competence (Cohen, 1990; Ladd & Golter, 1988; Parke & Bhavnagri, 1988). In particular, both high and low levels of maternal involvement in children's peer relationships have been found to be associated with less sociable behaviour in children. Little is known, however, about the specific factors which motivate parents to become involved in their children's social lives during middle childhood.

The primary goals of the present study were to investigate the normative variations and determinants of maternal involvement during middle childhood. A conceptual model was developed in order to represent the variables which were hypothesized to be important sources of variability in maternal involvement (See Figure 1).

1. Consistent with recent cognitive mediational models of parenting (e.g., see Goodnow, 1988 for a review), it was proposed that involvement would be influenced by parents' perceptions of their children's social behaviour, beliefs about its causes, consequences, and normativeness, and their level of concern about their children. More specifically, it was hypothesized that mothers who perceived their children to be more socially withdrawn, appraised their children's behaviour to be unstable and non-normative, and

felt that they were causally responsible for the behaviour would have higher levels of involvement. It was also anticipated that the more concerned mothers were, the more intensive their involvement would be.

2. The present study went beyond current models of parental social cognition by proposing also that affective and motivational factors, derived from parents' recollections of their own peer group experiences both in childhood and at present, colour their perceptions and appraisals of their children's behaviour, thus influencing their involvement. It was hypothesized that constellations of maternal experiences would lead some mothers to place more value on sociability and devote more effort to promoting their children's peer relationships. For example, mothers who were socially withdrawn and unhappy as children might react to these negative experiences by placing a high degree of importance on their children being sociable in order to insure that their children are not subject to the same kinds of experiences that they were.

3. Finally, maternal social experiences were also hypothesized to influence involvement, indirectly, by impacting upon mothers' perceptions of their children's behaviour and by moderating the relation between maternal cognitive appraisals and involvement. Thus, interactions between maternal peer experiences and values, and mothers' cognitive appraisals of their children's behaviour were also investigated in the present study.

METHOD

One hundred and forty three pairs of mothers and their children (76 girls, 67 boys) participated in the present study. The children were drawn from grades 3 to 6 classes in two

schools in the Kitchener-Waterloo region. The mean age of the children was 10.5 years (SD=11.6 months), and of the mothers was 36.4 years (range from 26-48 years). Data collection occurred in two stages. Initially, information about each child's social behaviour (sociability, social withdrawal and aggression) was obtained by having peers rate each other on 11 items selected from the Revised Class Play (Masten, Morison, & Pellegrini, 1985). Subsequently, participating mothers were sent a questionnaire booklet in the mail. They were asked to rate their own social behaviour, both in childhood and currently, on the same 11 items used to assess children's social behaviour. They also rated their affective reactions to their peer experiences. In addition, indices of the value mothers place on the characteristics of 'sociability-friendliness' and 'obedience-compliance' for themselves and their children were obtained. Mothers were also asked to evaluate their children's social behaviour using the same items the peers used, and to indicate their beliefs and concern about their children's peer relationships. Finally, they completed a 27-item behavioural checklist assessing their involvement in their children's social lives during the previous month.

In order to reduce the number of variables, factor analyses were conducted on related sets of variables (e.g., peer ratings, maternal self-ratings). Table 1 provides a summary of all of the measures used in the study and the factor scales derived from each related set of instruments. In all cases the unit-weighted factor scales reported (variables in Table I) were found to have acceptable levels of internal consistency reliability (i.e., Cronbach's alpha).

RESULTS

Maternal Involvement:

A common factors analysis with oblique rotation was conducted with the 27 maternal involvement items. Four factors which accounted for 49% of the total variance were identified. The first factor (Advice and Support) included activities such as talking to and comforting children when they have a problem involving peers. The second factor (Orchestration) was comprised of items reflecting mothers' attempts to arrange and manage their children's social lives (e.g., encouraging their children to invite friends to their homes). The third factor (Monitoring) consisted of items tapping mothers' efforts to monitor and supervise their children's peer relationships. Monitoring activities included solicitation of information from children about their peer relationships, indirect monitoring of children's activities (e.g., keeping track of who telephones the child), and direct supervision of children's activities. The fourth factor (High-Concern Involvement) reflected socialization activities mothers engage in when they are concerned that their children lack friends and want to remediate their children's social problems. Items contributing to this factor included "Encouraged your child to play with other children" and "Contacted your child's teacher about how he/she gets along with peers." As anticipated, the four involvement subscales were moderately intercorrelated.

Descriptive analyses highlighted the normative variations in maternal involvement during middle childhood. The most frequent involvement activities mothers engaged in, often on an ongoing basis, were monitoring and orchestrating their children's social lives. Mothers also provided advice and support to their children, typically once every two to three weeks. However, there was also considerable individual variability in these three activities, with some mothers reporting that they infrequently engaged in them. Finally, while a majority of mothers

never engaged in High-Concern Involvement activities, some mothers reported that they did so on a regular basis.

Interestingly, we also found that with increases in the frequency of maternal involvement there are concomitant changes in the quality of the involvement, as perceived by children. Specifically, mothers who provided their children with more advice and support were perceived by their children to be more psychologically controlling. There was also a trend for mothers who engaged in high-concern activities to be viewed as rejecting by their children.

Prediction of Maternal Ratings of their Children's Sociability:

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the influence of mothers' experiences and values on their ratings of their children's sociability-withdrawal (See Table 2). To obtain an index of the uniqueness (bias vs. accuracy) in mothers' views of their children, peer ratings were used as the first predictor of maternal ratings. By entering peer ratings into the analysis prior to the variables representing maternal experiences and values, it was possible to assess the amount of variance in mothers' ratings of their children's sociability accounted for by the latter variables, over and above any variance attributable to the correspondence between peer and maternal ratings of children's sociability. As can be seen in Table 2, the overall regression equation was significant ($RSQ = .30$, $p < .01$), as were several of the individual steps entered into the analysis. The principal findings of this analysis were:

1. Peer ratings only accounted for 10% of the variance in maternal ratings, a significant but small amount (Step 2).

2. Mothers' own peer group experiences made a significant contribution to their ratings of their children's sociability-withdrawal (Step 3). Mothers who tended to view themselves to be socially withdrawn or sociable, both in childhood or currently, were more likely to perceive their children to exhibit similar behaviours.

3. Finally, maternal values also influenced the accuracy of mothers' judgements about their children's sociability-withdrawal (Step 6). As can be seen in Figure 2, examination of the significant interaction between the value mothers placed on sociability-friendliness and peer ratings of sociability, indicated that when mothers valued sociability they tended to perceive their children's behaviour similarly to the way peers did, implying that they were more accurate. In contrast, when sociability was of lesser importance, they were insensitive to the variations in their children's sociability identified by peers.

Taken together, the results pertaining to the influence of mothers' social experiences and values on their perceptions of their children's behaviour suggest that mothers may make two potential types of errors in rating their children's behaviour. First, those who are themselves relatively unsociable and who value sociability are likely to be overinclusive in identifying problems, viewing their children to be more socially withdrawn than they really are. On the other hand, mothers who do not consider this to be an important area of their children's development and who are themselves less sociable may be underinclusive in identifying problems that appear objectively to be present. Both of these types of errors take on added significance in light of the fact that mothers' perceptions of their children's behaviour were found to be important determinants of their involvement, as considered below.

Prediction of Maternal Involvement:

Four hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the impact of maternal experiences and cognitive appraisals in the prediction of each involvement subscale. Maternal and child demographic characteristics, maternal peer experiences, socialization values, and their perceptions and beliefs about their children's behaviour were entered sequentially in the first five steps of each analysis. Following this, the two-way interactions between variables representing mothers' values and their perceptions and beliefs about their children's social behaviour were entered into each analysis. These interactions addressed the hypothesis that the relation of maternal appraisals of their children's behaviour to involvement might vary as a function of maternal values. Finally, maternal concern was added in the last step of each regression analysis.

The overall F tests for the regression equations predicting Advice and Support and High-Concern Involvement were significant ($p < .05$) and those for Orchestration and Monitoring were marginally significant. All results reported reflect significant increases in the value of RSQ when the variables described were entered into the relevant regression equation.

The principle findings were:

1. Mothers' peer experiences, particularly their level of sociability influenced how frequently they orchestrated their children's social lives. Mothers who considered themselves to be more socially withdrawn in childhood, and/or who considered themselves to be sociable as adults, had higher orchestration scores. Interestingly, there was also a tendency for mothers to spend less time orchestrating their children's peer relationships when they felt

that it was important for their children to be obedient and compliant.

2. Maternal involvement was greater (Advice & Support, High-Concern Involvement) as mothers perceived their children to be more socially withdrawn. In addition, mothers who perceived their children to be socially withdrawn, but not aggressive, were more likely to monitor their children's social lives.

3. Maternal beliefs about the stability, responsibility, and normativeness of their children's behaviour were significantly associated with all types of maternal involvement; and these associations were generally dependent upon maternal values. The following examples are representative of the findings. First, as anticipated, mothers who viewed their children's behaviour to be unstable were more likely to provide advice and support; however, this relation was stronger when 'sociability-friendliness' was less important (see Figure 3). Mothers who value sociability may feel that it is important to intervene in their children's social lives, in spite of their belief that their children's behaviour will remain stable. Second, as can be seen in Figure 4, when mothers considered sociability to be unimportant, beliefs about causal responsibility had little impact on their level of Advice and Support. However, as they placed more value on sociability, they provided less advice when they believed their causal responsibility to be low, and more advice when they perceived it to be high. In other words, only when sociability was strongly valued were beliefs about causal responsibility an important influence on involvement. Lastly, when mothers valued sociability, their beliefs about the normativeness of their children's behaviour had a stronger association with both High-Concern Involvement and

Orchestration.

4. Finally, maternal concern made a significant contribution to the prediction of Advice and Support and High Concern Involvement. The more concerned mothers were the more they engaged in these involvement activities.

DISCUSSION

The present findings begin to shed some light on the nature of maternal involvement in children's peer relationships in the middle childhood years. Four distinct types of activities characterize mothers' involvement: 1) monitoring and supervision, 2) orchestration, 3) the provision of emotional support and advice, and 4) activities such as contacting teachers and parents which they engage in primarily when they are concerned or worried about their children. Although these different subtypes of involvement are moderately interrelated, suggesting that there is a general tendency for some mothers to be more or less involved, the present findings also suggest that there are unique causal factors associated with each type of involvement. In general, Monitoring and Orchestration were not found to be as strongly predicted by maternal cognitive and affective appraisals as were Advice and Support and High-Concern Involvement. This may reflect the fact the former activities were engaged in with a high frequency by most mothers, and may be less sensitive to individual differences in mothers' appraisals of their children's behaviours.

The conceptual model presented proposed that mothers would adjust their level of involvement to accommodate the perceived needs of their children. This prediction was supported in the present study. As hypothesized, mothers who perceived their children to

exhibit more socially withdrawn behaviour and were concerned about this provided more advice and support and engaged in more high-concern involvement activities. The notion that parents adjust their socialization behaviours in accordance with the specific characteristics of their children's behaviour is by now well established (Dix & Grusec, 1985; Kuczynski, 1984). The results of the present study imply, however, that it is not only children's objective behaviour that elicits differential socialization responses in parents, but the importance and meaning that parents attribute to particular behaviours in their children. A further implication of the present study is that the nature of maternal perceptions of children's social behaviour and the extent to which their beliefs influence their involvement are strongly influenced by 'parent effects' - the unique child-irrelevant experiences and values that parents bring to the task of socializing their children. In a sense, mothers' reconstructions of their own peer experiences and values can be thought of as affective self-schemas. Research within an information processing paradigm has indicated that self-schemata influence the way that information is attended to, perceived, interpreted, and responded to (Markus & Sentis, 1982). Thus, for mothers who value sociability, information about their children's social behaviour may be more accessible, increasing the accuracy of their perceptions, and triggering further schema-relevent cognitive appraisal processes.

The results of the present study also suggest that maternal experiences may have a proactive influence on their involvement behaviour, independently of their specific cognitive appraisals of their children's behaviour. Specifically, we found that mothers who considered themselves to be sociable as adults/and or who viewed themselves to be more socially withdrawn in childhood orchestrated more frequently. It stands to reason that more sociable adults would

spend more time promoting their children's friendships. On the other hand, the higher levels of orchestration found among mothers who reported that they were socially withdrawn as children suggests that some mothers take measures to insure that their children are not exposed to the same negative experiences that they were.

An alternative interpretation of this opposite pattern of association is that the joint influence of mothers' childhood and current sociability determines their involvement because it captures their implicit theories about the potential for change versus consistency in the characteristic of sociability across the lifespan. For example, mothers who recalled being socially withdrawn in childhood and who felt that they were able to change and become more sociable as adults may be operating according to an implicit theory that sociability is an inherently unstable and malleable characteristic. This implies that their efforts to orchestrate their children's social lives can have a positive impact on their children. Clarification of this interpretation requires a more explicit assessment of mothers' implicit theories of stability and change in this domain.

The results pertaining to the prediction of involvement begin to highlight the constellation of factors that may lead some parents of less sociable children to have higher or lower levels of involvement than the average parent. First, mothers who value sociability are more likely to accurately perceive their children's behaviour and thus identify problems of social withdrawal. If these mothers were themselves socially withdrawn they may exaggerate the severity of their children's difficulties, triggering concern and efforts to understand the significance of their children's behaviour and leading to greater involvement. Alternatively, mothers who are not

themselves socially withdrawn and/or who do not value sociability may be less likely to notice less sociable behaviour in their children. Consequently, these mothers may be less concerned about their children's social behaviour and devote less time to thinking about their children's behaviour, resulting in lower levels of involvement.

In summary, these findings suggest that mothers' involvement in their children's social lives can be best understood within the context of mothers' personal experiences and values. As such, they set the stage for future research which can move beyond the level of description to focus on the process by which familial factors contribute to the development and maintenance of children's sociability with peers.

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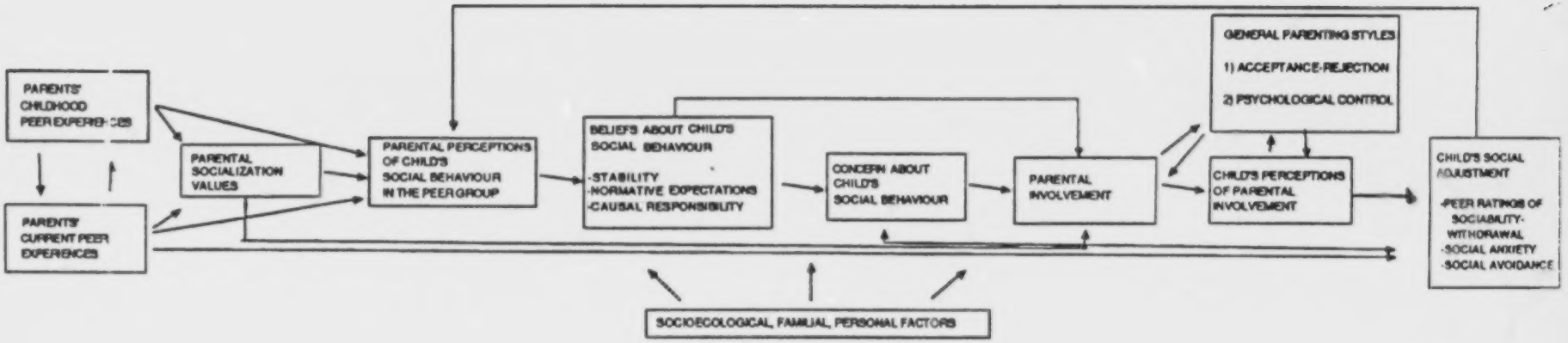

Figure 1. Conceptual model of the determinants and consequences of maternal involvement.

Table 1

Overview of Measures Used in the Study

Instrument	Source of Data	Variables
Children's Social Competence		
Peer Ratings of Social Behaviour	Peers	1. Sociability 2. Aggression
Social Anxiety and Social Avoidance Scale for Children (Franke & Hymel, 1984)	Child	1. Social Anxiety 2. Social Avoidance
Mothers' Peer-Group Experiences		
Recollections of Childhood Social Relationships Questionnaire - Ratings of social behaviour - Ratings of affective reactions - Epstein Peer Acceptance Scale (Epstein, 1983) - Perceived long term impact of childhood peer relationships.	Mother	1. Childhood Peer Sociability 2. Current Peer Sociability 3. Maternal Aggression 4. Importance
Current Relationships Questionnaire - Ratings of social behaviour - Ratings of affective reactions - Peer Acceptance Rating	Mother	
Mothers' Socialization Values		
Maternal Values Inventory	Mother	1. Ranking of 'Sociability-Friendliness' 2. Ranking of 'Obedience-Compliance'

Table 1 (Continued)

Instrument	Source of Data	Variables
<u>Mothers' Evaluations of Their Children's Peer Relationships</u>		
Parent Perceptions of Children's Peer Relationships Questionnaire - ratings of child's social behaviour - ratings of satisfaction and perceived acceptance of child - ratings of causal influences - normative expectations - stability ratings - concern ratings	Mother	1. Child Sociability 2. Child Aggression 3. Maternal Causal Responsibility 4. Normative Expect. 5. Stability 6. Concern 7. Satisfaction
<u>Maternal Behaviour</u>		
Parental Involvement Checklist	Mother	1. Advice and Support 2. Orchestration 3. Monitoring 4. High-Concern Involvement
Children's Perceptions of Parental Involvement	Child	1. Advice and Support 2. Orchestration 3. Monitoring
Children's Report of Parental Behaviour Inventory (Prabhu, 1987; Schaefer, 1965)	Child	1. Acceptance-Rejection 2. Psychological Control

Table 2

Multiple Regression Analysis for the Prediction of Maternal Ratings of Children's Sociability-Withdrawal

Step of Entry Predictors	RSQ	RSQ Change	F Change	Beta* at Entry
Step 1 - Covariates	.00	.00	.03	
Sex of Child				.17
Age of Mother				-.01
Education Level of Mother				-.01$^{\cdot}$
Step 2 - Peer Ratings of Child Behaviour	.10	.10	6.63$^{\cdot\cdot\cdot}$	
Sociability-Withdrawal				.31$^{\cdot\cdot}$
Aggression-Disruptiveness				.15
Step 3 - Maternal Peer Experiences	.22	.12	4.64$^{\cdot\cdot}$	
Childhood Peer Experiences				.05$^{\cdot}$
Current Peer Experiences				.13$^{\cdot}$
Importance of Peer Experiences				-.29
Maternal Aggression				-.07
Step 4 - Maternal Socialization Values	.23	.01	.74	
Value of Sociability				-.10
Value of Obedience-Compliance				.10
Step 5 - Maternal Peer Experiences X Child Behaviour	.27	.04	1.61	
Childhood Peer Exp. X Child Soc.				.01$^{\cdot}$
Current Peer Exp. X Child Soc.				-.00
Importance X Child Soc.				-.10$^{\cdot}$
Maternal Aggression X Child Agg.				-.04
Step 6 - Maternal Socialization Values X Child Behaviour	.30	.04	3.15$^{\cdot}$	
Value of Sociability X Child Soc.				-.08$^{\cdot}$
Value of Obedience X Child Agg.				-.07

*B Refers to the unstandardized partial regression weight. The asterisks in this column refer to tests of the null hypothesis that the unstandardized partial regression weights do not differ from zero.

$^{\cdot}p<.10$. $^{\cdot}p<.05$. $^{\cdot\cdot}p<.01$. $^{\cdot\cdot\cdot}p<.001$.

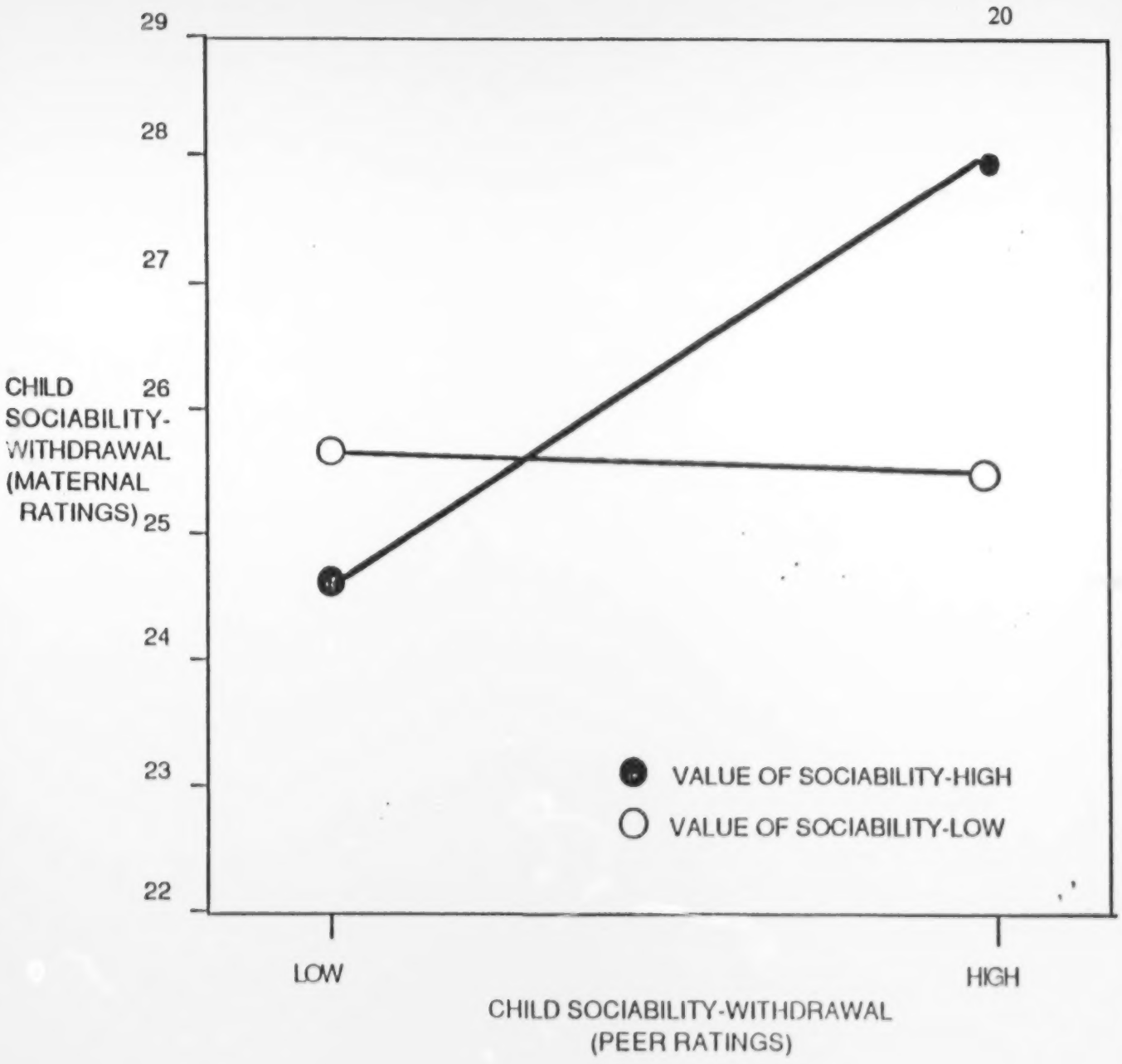

Figure 2. Two-way interaction between the value of sociability-friendliness and peer ratings of children's sociability-withdrawal in the prediction of maternal ratings of children's sociability-withdrawal.

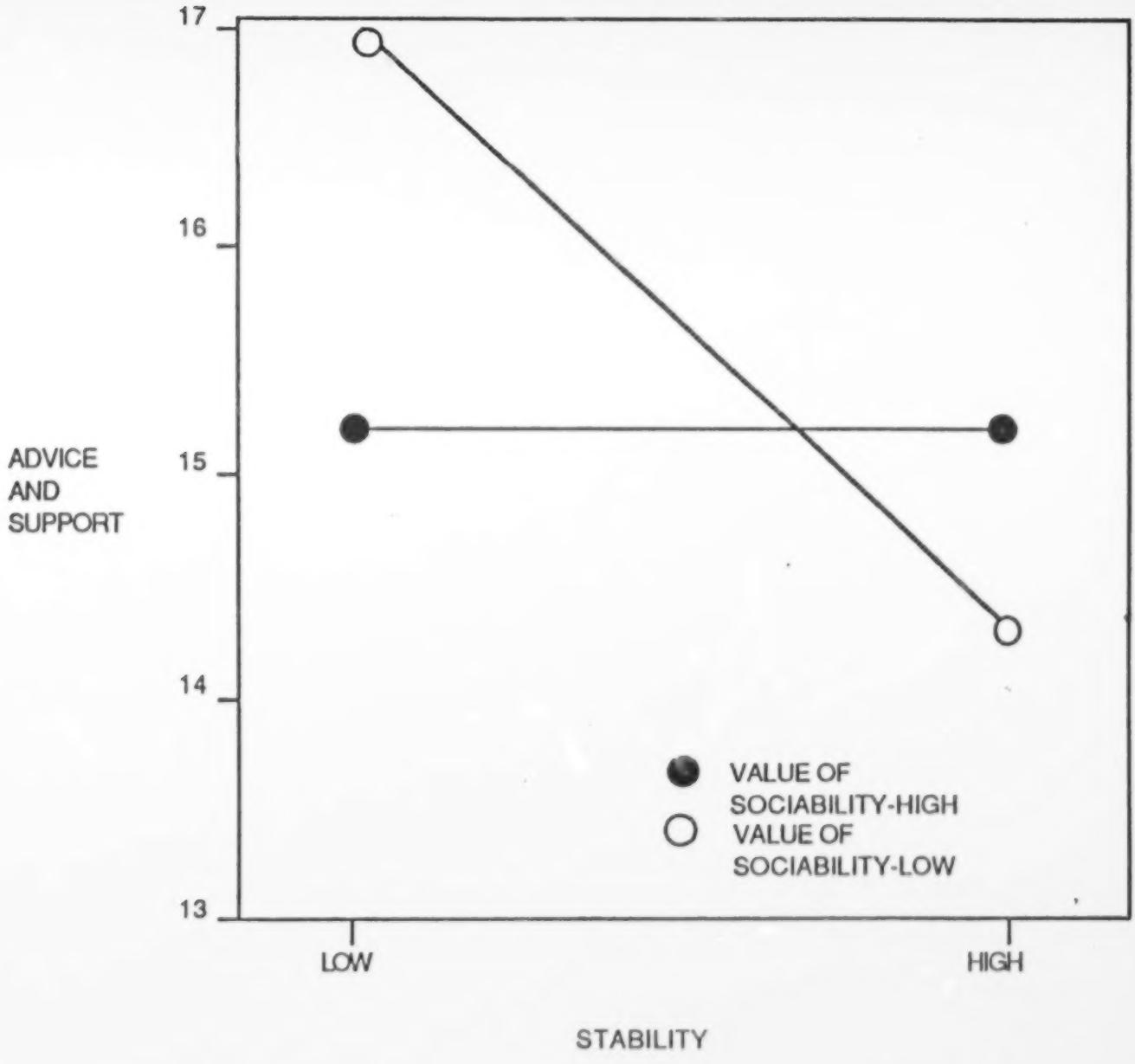

Figure 3. Two-way interaction between the stability of sociability-withdrawal and the value of sociability-friendliness in the prediction of Advice and Support.

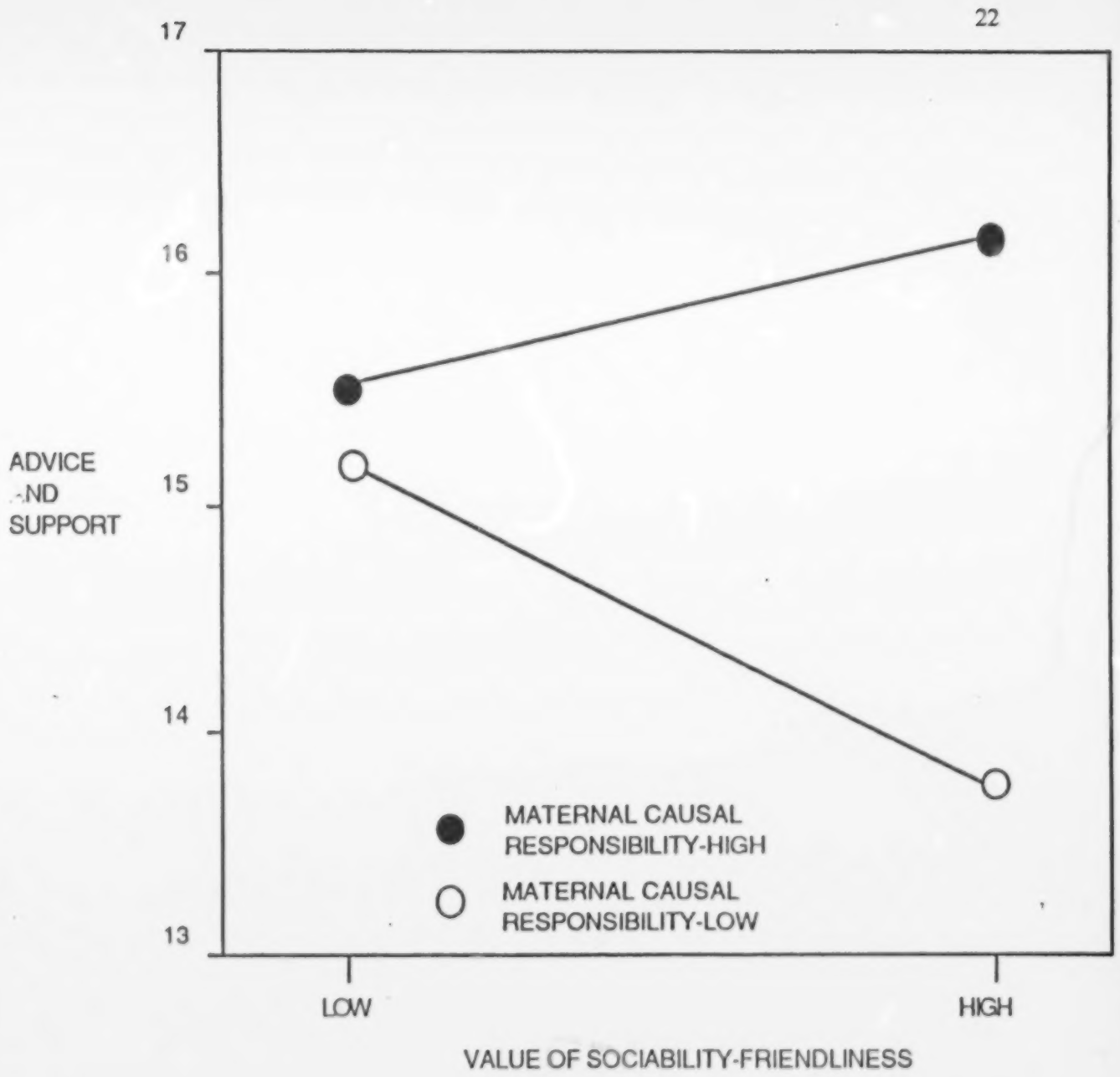

Figure 4. Two-way interaction between the value of sociability-friendliness and maternal causal responsibility for children's sociability-withdrawal in the prediction of Advice and Support.